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Book Review: Gender and the Economic Crisis

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***fGender and the Economic Crisis*. 2011. Pearson, R & Sweetman, C. 2011. Oxfam. Oxford. Pp 167, ISBN 978 1 85339 713 4**

Reviewed by Betty C Mubangizi¹

In attempting to understand the effect of the economic crisis, most analysts have focused on financial markets, corporate debt and the ecological damage. There has been little discussion on the impact of the economic crisis on the smaller units of society. Where this has happened, the unit of analysis has been the household without much attention to gender related power dynamics within the household.

Gender and the Economic Crisis edited by Ruth Pearson and Caroline Sweetman, brings a dimension to the crisis that has hitherto received little attention. The book makes the point that the effects of the economic crisis are profoundly different for men and women and that the existing gender inequalities and power imbalances mean that additional problems are falling disproportionately on those who are already structurally disempowered and marginalized.

The first two chapters provide the reader with a gendered framework for understanding the effect of the crisis. In this regard, chapter 1 advances the fact that the economic crisis of 2008 resulted in widespread destruction of jobs and livelihoods. The chapter makes a passionate call to policy makers to advance policy and strategic proposals that promote jobs, economic security, and equality by class, gender and ethnicity. Chapter 3 gives an analytical framework for understanding the effect of the economic crisis. It does this by arguing for the necessity to distinguish between the *financial* sphere of the economy; the *productive* sphere – where goods and services are produced and the *reproductive* sphere where human labour and capital are reproduced over different generations and which includes all work undertaken to care for human beings.

Chapter 4 draws on research by a Thai NGO and examines the gendered impacts of the economic downturn on migrants from Burma/Myanmar working in Thailand and seeks to show how women migrants have experienced more adverse conditions than their male counterparts. The discussion concludes that, as a result of the economic downturn, migrant women have experienced reduced wages, increased lay-offs and restrictions on their reproductive rights. It recommends the integration of women into Thai society as mitigating measure to the adverse effects they are faced with. However, the discussion does not recommend how this can be attained considering the obvious unfriendly immigration laws implied in this chapter.

Chapter 5 presents part findings of an ongoing research commissioned by OXFAM to look into the impact of the economic crisis on women in five different countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This chapter reports on the findings of the research on garment workers in the Phillipines. The findings of that study confirm the conceptual framework of chapter 2 which highlight that women are more vulnerable to the impact of the crisis than men in the same socio economic groups. The findings also highlight the feminization of the recession and show that women were overrepresented in sectors where the crisis had caused huge job cuts – notably, the export

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manufacturing, garments industry, electronics and services. Further, the findings point to the fact that women were employed in precarious jobs with insecure tenure as migrant workers and in the garment industry. That women tend to be responsible for family welfare means that they would be worst affected by cuts in public spending on safety nets and reduction in remittance income. Recommendations from the study are two pronged focusing firstly on advocacy instruments for sustainable macroeconomic development and secondly on advocacy mechanisms for the protection of workers' rights.

In Chapter 6 the author draws on experiences of Women Worldwide - an international development organization which researched on women farm workers in Peru's Inca valley. The discussion shows how the economic crisis has increased women's unemployment and worsened their poverty. The discussion is quick to point out that this negative impact has been exacerbated by a pervasive environment of discrimination, ingrained labour rights violation and gender inequalities. Thus while the author notes that a range of coping strategies adopted by women in response to this crisis, it concludes that the solution to the problem brought on by the crisis must go beyond macroeconomic responses. In particular, it recommends advocacy campaigns, leadership training programmes and other such strategies that change mindsets and increase the self-esteem and confidence of women.

Chapter 7 examines the impact of the global economic crisis on the migration of Ethiopian women workers in the gulf region. With the IMF having estimated that remittances in Ethiopia contribute 10 – 20% of Ethiopia's GDP – it's no doubt that remittances are crucial to the resilience of the country's economy. This chapter, which is based on a qualitative study, starts by outlining the main countries of destination for Ethiopian women and routes of migration. It then continues to profile the migrant women with regard to age; marital status; education levels; religious affiliation and income levels. The chapter proceeds to discuss the impact of the global downturn on these women. In the main, the discussion notes a drop in women migrants due to tighter immigration controls as the gulf countries seek to employ their own nationals. The discussion also notes a resultant decline in remittances and an increase in unrecorded migrants.

This chapter concludes by suggesting policy responses to mitigate the negative consequences of the global economic crisis. It recommends policy changes that enhance social protection measures which strengthen the capacity of families to withstand crises. Further, this chapter recommends the improvement of employment conditions of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers who might, as a result of tighter immigration control measures, find themselves in exploitative employment conditions.

Chapter 8 discusses the effect of the global crisis on women in the informal economy. The discussion is based on findings from an ongoing study conducted by the Inclusive Cities project and coordinated by Women in Informal Employment Globalization and Organisation (WIEGO). The discussion stratifies the findings into two distinct phases of effects. The first-round effects in which diminished income is noted across the spectrum of women in the informal economy and the second-round effects in which there is; a significant increase in family responsibilities as other family members loose employment; a reduction in the quality and quantity of food; cutbacks on education and medical expenses; and high indebtedness as well as a general feeling of depression and exhaustion. The chapter recommends that public policies be developed through a

participatory process that engages poor women and informal workers in the design and implementation of these measures, emergency relief measures and the need to mobilize women for leadership positions.

Using a case study of street traders in Johannesburg, South Africa, chapter 9 explores the effects of liberal macroeconomic policies on women. The findings indicate that female traders' households rely significantly more than male traders' households on income generated through trading. Yet, as the findings show, these women traders are experiencing a decline in income. The causes of the decline in income and profits are due to declining demand, greater competition, and market saturation. Variations in levels of trade in which traders experienced lull periods mainly as a result of inflation which limits their customers' spending patterns was also cited as a reason for declining income.

The last chapter places emphasis on the reproductive sphere of the economy. It points out the effect of the economic crisis on the care of children both directly at the microlevel, but also indirectly at the meso level and the macro-level where for instance government policy responses may shape a household's ability to function – translating into multi-dimensional poverty. The final section of this chapter discusses the implications of all this for policy makers. In addition, it outlines ways in which counter-cyclical spending and transformative social protection can mitigate the impact of the crisis on the reproductive sphere of the economy.

This book is a compilation of academic journal articles. All the chapters, except the last one, appeared in *Gender & Development* 18(2), July 2010. The authors and the editors should be commended for presenting academic discussions into user-friendly yet informative and deeply insightful readings. As indicated earlier the greatest strength of this book is that it is based on field research infused with the experiences of various organizations that have worked with women in various circumstances. A further strength is that it makes an attempt to document experiences of women in many regions of the developing world. There is, however, a notable absence of stories and experiences of women in tropical Africa involved in multiple livelihood strategies. It would be useful to obtain insights of such women whose daily toil falls neither in the category of formal or informal work but who are nonetheless affected by the economic turmoil directly (economic and environmental changes) and indirectly (through expenditure cut backs by their governments).

The uniqueness of this book is that it does not rely on *a priori* analysis based on studies of previous phenomenon. Instead, the book draws on detailed case studies of what actually happened immediately after the first aftershocks of the economic crisis. In doing so, the book manages to construct an overview of what was happening from a gendered economic perspective while remaining realistic about the limitations of applying the analysis to the current situation.

Fundamentally, the book makes a passionate plea for policy – makers and practitioners alike to not only worry about the impact of the *economic* crisis, but also to examine the impact of the crisis on *production*, and beyond that, the impact of the crisis on the *reproductive* and care economy. Only by adopting this tripartite focus, it is argued, will development policies safeguard human capital and capabilities for future development. The book is good reading material for people interested in issues of gender with regard to the economic crisis. It is suitable for NGO's, academics and policy makers

who are keen on not only understanding gender issues but who are keen on finding practical strategies and solutions to the crisis.